

Effective Practice case study: SEND clusters in South Gloucestershire

Summary

South Gloucestershire's 2017 local area special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) inspection identified several areas for improvement including leadership, timely identification of need, educational outcomes for children and young people with SEND¹, and joint commissioning and access to targeted support. A new SEND strategy was agreed for the local area, implemented from 2018. As part of this a new school-led model for children and young people at special educational needs (SEN) support was developed and a cross-phase cluster pilot operating in two geographical areas launched in 2019. At the time, there was an over-reliance on Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) as the main means of accessing support, and the work of the clusters was to build capacity within schools to improve early identification of need with arrangements for providing access to support, and thereby reduce escalation of need. The aims of the cluster approach would be access to support at the right time, reduced exclusion rates and improved educational outcomes.

The model was supported by South Gloucestershire Schools Forum, with funding from the High Needs Budget delegated to the lead school for each cluster to develop a more effective response for children and young people with SEND across the schools in their geographical area.

The potential of the school-led cluster model, and commitment of local school leaders to promoting their collective responsibility to deliver an effective response to meeting the needs of all children and young people with SEND, was evident to the inspection team and captured in the local area SEND inspection re-visit in 2020. Consequently, the Schools Forum agreed that a five-cluster model should be rolled out covering the whole local area and this was implemented in the 2020/2021 academic year, supported with a total budget of £1 million. Over three years on, the clusters are an established part of the local SEND system in South Gloucestershire. Local SEND system leaders consider that the SEND clusters have encouraged greater understanding, improved identification and collective responsibility for children and young people with SEND, including on the part of mainstream schools, and continues to be borne out by feedback from school staff. Benchmarked data also indicate an improvement in identification and outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

¹ For ease of reading, we use the term 'SEND' to refer to disabled children and young people and children and young people with special educational needs.

The SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework considers that the “strength of evidence” of this case study is **promising** – the clusters have been reviewed internally, with some external validation via the local area SEND inspection revisit and have been sustained for more than two years. The “breadth of impact” of this case study is **emerging** – there is evidence of impact in the form of feedback from practitioners involved with the clusters, along with some evidence of improving outcomes for children and young people.²



Why was this work undertaken? What did the work aim to do?

South Gloucestershire had its local area SEND inspection in November 2017. The [inspection report](#) identified eight areas for improvement, including leadership, timely identification of need, educational outcomes for children and young people with SEND, and joint commissioning and access to targeted support. Local SEND system leaders acknowledged that, at the time of the inspection, there was a lack of access to support that did not rely on a child or young person having an EHCP. As such, EHCPs were seen as the main way to access support. At the time, South Gloucestershire had a higher proportion of school-age pupils that had EHCPs than was the case nationally (3.8% in South Gloucestershire compared with 3% in England), and a lower proportion of pupils identified as requiring SEN Support (10.9% in South Gloucestershire compared with 12.1% nationally).

For this reason, leaders agreed to develop a model of SEND clusters, whereby mainstream schools would work together using high needs block funding to commission additional support for children and young people with SEND and other needs who may need support in their learning, based on the needs in different localities across the county.

² The SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework uses two “signal strength” indicators to present the strength of evidence and the breadth of impact of a case study. Each indicator has four bars – emerging, promising, good and robust. The “strength of evidence” indicator is based on how the project has been evaluated and the length of time it has been sustained. The “breadth of impact” indicator is based on whether the case study can demonstrate impact in four broad areas – the more areas of impact, the higher the signal strength indicator.

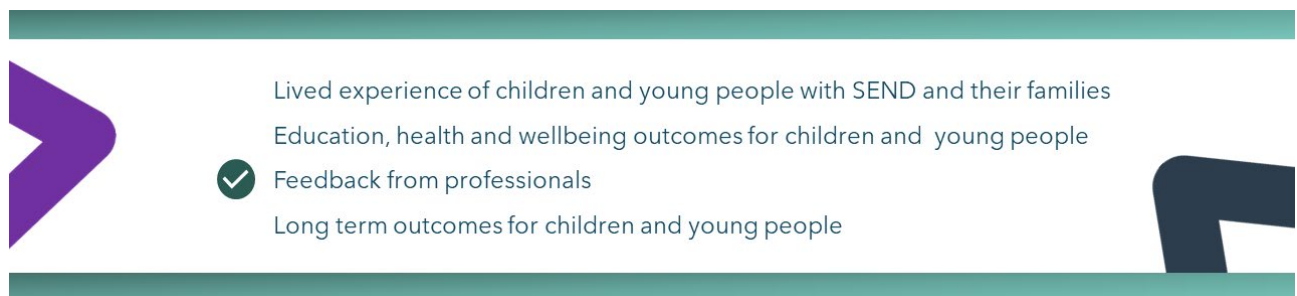
The SEND cluster model had four fundamental aims:

1. **Strengthening leadership and shared ownership of SEND priorities** by all partners, but specifically including schools;
2. **Improving joint commissioning and access to evidence-based interventions for children and young people requiring SEN Support**, that was not dependent on having an EHCP or a specific diagnosis;
3. **Encouraging earlier and accurate identification of need**, by building capacity, knowledge and skills in schools; and
4. **Embedding a culture of inclusion, by fostering sustainable, whole-school approaches** and improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

At the outset, local SEND system leaders set a number of benchmarks against which the impact of the SEND clusters would be tracked. These included:

- ✦ Improved identification of SEND, with an increase in the proportions of children and young people identified at the level of SEN Support and reduced reliance on EHCPs as a means of accessing support; and
- ✦ Improved outcomes for children and young people with SEND, including improved academic outcomes and a reduction in permanent exclusions.

What was the impact?



Lived experience of children and young people with SEND and their families
Education, health and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people
✓ Feedback from professionals
Long term outcomes for children and young people

Aims 1 and 2 – Strengthening leadership and joint commissioning

Local SEND system leaders consider that one of the benefits of the SEND clusters is that they have made explicit and tangible the fact the mainstream schools are a central pillar of the local SEND system. Rather than seeing SEND as "someone else's responsibility", the SEND cluster model sought to foster greater understanding and collective responsibility for children and young people with SEND on the part of mainstream schools, while at the same time building inclusive capacity and enabling school leaders to create a more responsive offer of targeted support based on the needs they were seeing in their schools.

South Gloucestershire had its local area SEND inspection re-visit shortly after the SEND cluster pilot was launched. The inspection [report](#) comments positively on the SEND cluster model and the early signs of collaborative working between services.

'The introduction of the SEND cluster model is resulting in more responsive, child-centred, local and cooperative working between services. This model, currently under trial, is leading to effective support for some children and young people with SEND.'

The way the SEND clusters have supported leaders and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in mainstream schools, in terms of providing advice and support, have been strong and consistent themes in feedback captured from SENCOs. As one primary school headteacher commented, *'I think something incredibly positive has been created'*. Below is a selection of quotes captured during the third year of operation for the clusters.

'The SEN Cluster has decreased the sense of isolation that can be felt by SENCOs as it can be quite a specialist role in a school.' **SENCO**

'What a fantastic team leading this cluster and I am very grateful of their support and hard work.' **SENCO**

'Thank you to the leadership team who work incredibly hard to keep the project going and information flowing. All emails and inquiries are responded to quickly and advice is always helpful.' **SENCO**

'I love the SEND cluster and feel it has been a very positive move, especially when I compare what is out there for children who live in other authorities.' **SENCO**

'The support from the cluster has been invaluable this year. It has moved our practice on hugely and enabled us to develop and improve the provision we have for vulnerable children.' **SENCO**

'Really useful professional dialogue. A really creative and accessible model compared to other authorities that I have seen.' **SENCO**

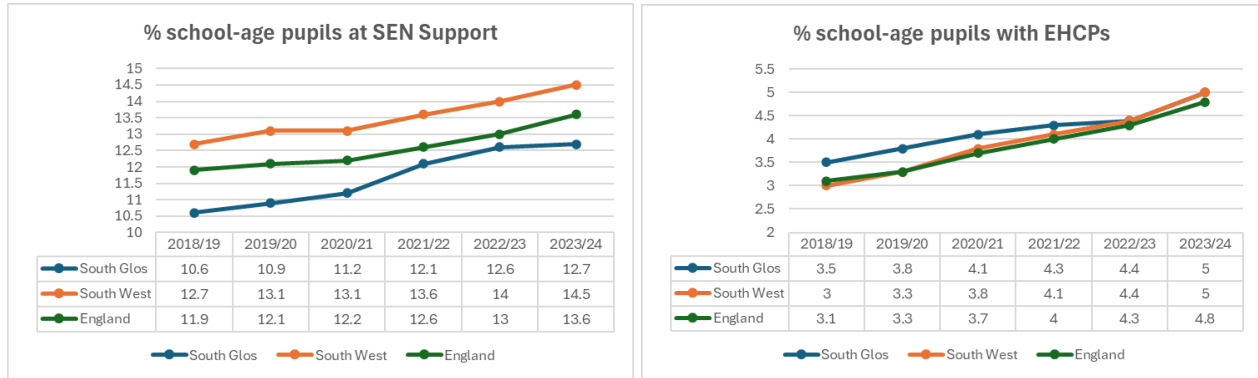
Aim 3 – Improving identification of need

While there is evidence of a change in the pattern of need identified in South Gloucestershire, local SEND system leaders acknowledge that the SEND clusters are one of several aspects of the local SEND system, and that it is not possible to disaggregate and isolate their impact from wider changes and external factors (including the impact and aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic). With that caveat in mind, local SEND system leaders consider that there is evidence of improved identification of need.

Published data shows an increase (and more recently a stabilisation) in the proportion of school-age pupils identified as having needs at the level of SEN Support and a narrowing of the gap to regional and national benchmarks. In 2018/19, the year before the SEND clusters were established, 10.6% of pupils in South Gloucestershire were identified as requiring SEN Support, compared to 12.7% across the Southwest and 11.9% in England. The proportion of pupils identified as requiring SEN Support in South Gloucestershire has increased to 12.6% in 2022/23 and 12.7% in 2023/24, closing the gap to the regional and national average in 2022/23, albeit with the gap widening slightly in 2023/24 due to a sharp increase regionally and nationally. In primary schools, the proportion of pupils on SEN Support in South Gloucestershire rose from 10.9% in 2018/19 to 12.3% in 2023/24 (compared with 12.6% and 14.1%). In secondary schools over the same period, the proportion of pupils on SEN Support in South Gloucestershire rose from 10.2% to 13.4% (compared with 11.5% and 14.1% nationally).

Published data also show that the growth in the number of school-age pupils with EHCPs, while it has continued, has been slower in South Gloucestershire than it has regionally or nationally. In 2018/19, the year before the SEND clusters were introduced, 3.5% of school-age pupils in South Gloucestershire had an EHCP, compared with 3% in the Southwest and 3.1% nationally. In the last two years, South Gloucestershire has recorded the same figure as the regional average (4.4% in 2022/23 and 5% in 2023/24), slightly above but tracking the national figures (4.3% in 2022/23 and 4.8% in 2023/24). In primary schools, the proportion of pupils with EHCPs in South Gloucestershire has grown more slowly than the rates regionally and nationally, and the gap has narrowed – South Gloucester's figure (2.8%) was broadly in line with the regional average (2.7%) and national average (2.5%) in 2022/23, although there has been an increase in South Gloucestershire in 2023/24. In secondary schools, South Gloucestershire had a higher proportion of pupils with EHCPs in 2018/19 (2.1%) than the regional average (1.8%) and national average (1.7%). In 2023/24, however, the South Gloucestershire figure was in line with the regional average (3.2%), albeit above the national average (2.7%).

The chart below shows the trends in the identification of SEN Support and EHCPs between 2018/19 and 2023/24 for all school-age pupils.



Aim 4 – Embedding a culture of inclusion

Local SEND system leaders consider that there is evidence, drawn from a range of sources, that the SEND clusters have contributed to creating a stronger culture of inclusion and to improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND. First, there is evidence, drawn from inspection reports, of stronger whole-school inclusion. Analysis by local SEND system leaders of school inspection reports between September 2019 and February 2024 show that 85% of school inspections make specific reference to good practice in supporting pupils with SEND. Inspection reports often refer to:

- ✦ Teachers knowing pupils well and understanding their individual needs;
- ✦ Schools having high expectations and ambitions for pupils with SEND; and
- ✦ Pupils with SEND accessing the full curriculum, taking a full part in the life of the school, and learning and achieving well.

In terms of academic outcomes – and these come with the caveat of the disruption to assessment and the volatility of national data in the years since the pandemic – a higher proportion of pupils identified as requiring SEN Support in South Gloucestershire have achieved expected standards in reading, writing and maths at the end of Key Stage 2 before and after the pandemic (25% in 2019, 2022 and 2023) than their peers regionally (23% in 2019, 19% in 2022, 21% in 2023) and nationally (25% in 2019, 21% in 2022, 24% in 2023). Within South Gloucestershire, the gap between pupils identified as requiring SEN Support and those with no identified SEN also narrowed between 2019 (50% points) and 2022 and 2023 (45% points in both years).

The picture is more mixed at Key Stage 4, however. The average Attainment 8 score of South Gloucestershire pupils with SEN Support increased between 2019 and 2021, and the gap to the regional and national average narrowed. The average Attainment 8 score of pupils in SEN Support in South Gloucestershire increased from 30.6% in 2019 to 37.1% in 2021, compared

with an increase from 31.7% to 37.4% regionally, and from 32.6% to 36.7% nationally. Since then, Attainment 8 scores for this cohort have fallen nationally and regionally, albeit the decline has been more pronounced in South Gloucestershire – the 2023 Attainment 8 score for pupils on SEN Support in South Gloucestershire was 30.9%, compared with 32.8% regionally and 33.3% nationally.

Data on permanent exclusions for pupils with SEN Support shows a similar trend. Rates of permanent exclusions for pupils with SEN Support in South Gloucestershire have decreased in the years after the SEND clusters were introduced, dipping below both national and regional averages in 2020/21 in both the primary and secondary phase and again in 2022/23 (the most recent year for which published data are available). There has, however, been an increase in South Gloucestershire in both phases in 2021/22. In 2022/23, the rate of permanent exclusion for pupils with SEN Support in primary schools was 0.07 in South Gloucestershire (compared to 0.14 across the Southwest and 0.13 across England), while in secondary schools the rate was 0.48 in South Gloucestershire (compared to 0.85 across the South West and 0.71 across England).

In parallel with high-level data indicators, local SEND system leaders have started a cycle of audits looking at pupils with SEN Support in primary schools. These audits have looked at pupils' learning goals and whether there was evidence of progress towards meeting these goals across an academic year. The audits have provided useful information about the impact of specific interventions and will inform further planning of the approach to evaluating the impact of the SEND clusters and the services that they commission.

What were the key actions and practices involved?

South Gloucestershire have created five cross-phase (primary and secondary) clusters of mainstream schools. In terms of how they operate, the SEND clusters have the following four key features, linked to the four original aims.

1. Leadership

The SEND clusters are chaired by a headteacher (or co-chaired by a pair of headteachers) and supported by a lead SENCO. The posts of cluster chair and lead SENCO are funded posts, which formalises these important roles and provides some remuneration to schools to reflect the additional responsibilities of staff in these roles. Each cluster has a decision-making board, which is made up of a representative from all mainstream schools in the local area they cover. In addition, cluster board members include a local special school representative, the link educational psychologist for the area, a senior EHCP coordinator, and the local authority's SEND Partnerships Manager. Local SEND system leaders have reflected on the importance of getting the membership of the clusters – and the respective roles and responsibilities of members – right, particularly in terms of providing support (which school staff can provide to one another) and challenge (which, colleagues have reflected, can need the support of an external party, such as the local authority).

Local SEND system leaders acknowledge that the SEND clusters are more firmly established in the primary phase. As learning for the future, leaders have found that the engagement from secondary schools has been better where clusters have a secondary school leader as chair or co-chair.

The clusters are linked into the governance structure of the local SEND system. Clusters report into the SEND Cluster Project Board, the membership of which includes the cluster leads, a special school lead, the Principal Educational Psychologist, the Head of the Virtual School, and the SEND Lead for the Integrated Commissioning Board. Commissioned providers attended cluster and board meetings on request.

2. Joint commissioning

Clusters are allocated a share of £1 million of high needs block funding. The distribution is based on the characteristics of each locality, including pupil numbers and levels of deprivation.

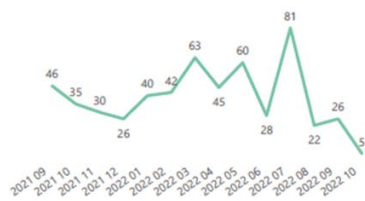
3. Earlier identification and intervention

The clusters are responsible for knowing the needs of children and young people in their locality and commissioning additional, targeted support to reflect those needs. Crucially, clusters have access to real-time information to inform commissioning decisions, including an innovative, real-time data dashboard with information about trends in SEN Support, Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA) requests, EHCPs, and primary needs. The dashboard is benchmarked to allow comparisons with other localities within South Gloucestershire and national averages. Local SEND system leaders have reflected on the importance of ensuring local datasets in education, health and care services can be broken down to community level – not a simple task, but one that they have found valuable in terms of enabling more localised commissioning by the clusters. An example excerpt from the data dashboard is included overleaf.

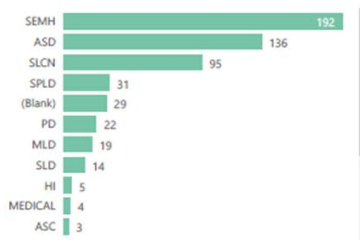
Number of People Referred for Assessment by Cluster (Academic Year)

Academic Year
Multiple select...

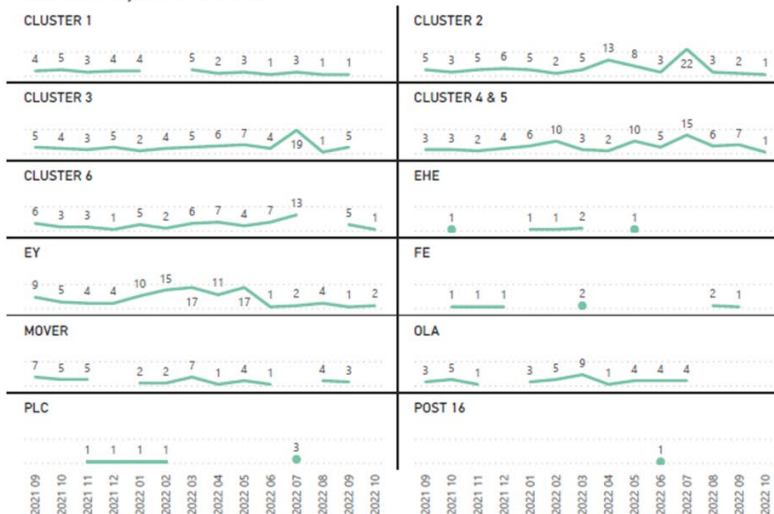
Total Referrals by Month



Total Referrals by Cluster



Total Referrals by Cluster over Time



Most of the support commissioned by the clusters is at the level of targeted support, building on and enhancing what is ordinarily available in mainstream schools but before the point at which statutory assessments and plans are required. Local SEND system leaders have found that the support that the clusters have commissioned has cut across traditional service boundaries of education, health and care services.

For example:

- ✦ All clusters have commissioned enhanced speech and language therapy support, and some have implemented additional screening for communication needs;
- ✦ All clusters have commissioned enhanced occupational therapy to improve access to sensory processing assessments;
- ✦ Some clusters have commissioned additional mentoring within and outside school for pupils;
- ✦ Some clusters have developed an offer of support in school holidays, food banks and access to counselling for families;
- ✦ Some clusters have commissioned family link workers to support families; and
- ✦ Some clusters have commissioned strategic support surgeries with educational psychologists to develop whole school SEND and inclusive practice.

Furthermore, local SEND system leaders have reflected on the fact that commissioning is a specific skillset and that school leaders may require support around commissioning. Local SEND system leaders are investing in creating a "Commissioning Officer" post from September 2024. The post-holder will work across the clusters to support effective commissioning, and to share intelligence and effective practice.

Related to this, leaders have acknowledged that localised commissioning can mean that there are different services available in different parts of the local area. They considered this when the clusters were first established. They considered that they were willing to accept variation in the offer of support where this reflected differences in local needs. They have also built in a process whereby aspects of support developed by the clusters can be scaled up and incorporated into a county-wide "core" offer, if there is evidence of the need for a consistent offer across the county. For example, mental health support teams working in schools, family link workers, and an offer of emotionally based school avoidance training from the educational psychology service have all been developed from, and are being rolled out through, the work of the SEND clusters.

4. A culture of inclusion

As part of their work, the clusters host termly SENCO fora. These bring together SENCOs from local schools to share practice. One of the activities of the SENCO fora is to review all requests for EHCNAs made by schools in the locality in the past term. This is done to improve transparency and consistency of practice, especially in relation to the identification of needs (both potential under- and over-identification), and to foster a sense of collective responsibility for SEND priorities. The SENCO fora play no formal role in the statutory decision-making in relation to requests for EHCNAs. The SEND clusters also facilitate whole school SEND reviews in all schools.

The SEND clusters have required sustained investment, in the form of £1m funding from the high needs block. Indeed, a key point of learning has been the need to give the SEND clusters the certainty of having multi-year budgets so that they can plan and commission services more effectively. The SEND clusters now have funding confirmed until 2027 to enable them to plan their work on a longer-term basis. Local SEND system leaders consider that this investment of high needs block resource provides excellent value for money in terms of fostering joint responsibility and enabling the commissioning of more responsive local support.

Has the work been sustained?

The SEND clusters have been in operation since 2020/21, having been introduced as a pilot in 2019. They have been operating across the local area for over three years and are now an established feature of the local SEND system in South Gloucestershire. Leaders have plans to continue to build on and refine how the clusters operate to build their capacity and strengthen their impact.

The learning from the SEND clusters in South Gloucestershire would be relevant to any local SEND system seeking to build inclusive capacity in mainstream education, foster collective responsibility for meeting the needs of all children and young people, and develop a more responsive offer of targeted support based on the needs of specific localities.



Finding out more

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